

Freud's dream theory from the perspective of his later work: On integrating the structural point of view into Freud's dream theory

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Summary. This article aims to provide a clearer and more accessible account of Freud's theory of dreams. The new perspective presented here is based on Chapter 5 of Freud's *Outline of Psychoanalysis*, which contains a concise summary of his dream theory from a structural point of view. The authors suggest using this chapter as an aid for understanding *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900), illustrated through selected passages from Chapter 7 of that work. The authors' intention is to demonstrate that *The Interpretation of Dreams* need not be entirely rewritten to accommodate Freud's structural model of the mind, as the topographical and structural models can be neatly integrated. This article then compares this new reading with earlier psychoanalytic publications, followed by a discussion of the clinical applications of dream theory. Finally, a ten-point summary is presented of the revised account of Freud's theory of dreams.

Keywords: Dream, psychoanalytic dream theory, Freud, sleep protection function

1. Introduction

This paper seeks to contribute to psychoanalytic conceptual research by clarifying and facilitating the understanding and application of Freud's dream theory as presented in Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). Since this *opus magnum* belongs to Freud's earlier works, it does not yet incorporate his later concepts of resistance and transference (cf. Binswanger, 2016) as well as the structural model of the mind, which Freud only introduces more than 20 years later (see especially Freud, 1923). This contribution focuses primarily on this latter aspect.

In our opinion, what is missing in *The Interpretation of Dreams* has often led to confusion and misunderstanding in the reception of Freud's dream theory. The first major misunderstanding concerns Freud's definition of the term *wish* and his assertion that every dream should be a *wish-fulfilment*. It remains unclear whether Freud intended the term *wish* to refer to expressions of a drive or to a defense against a drive. This ambiguity was first identified by Spanjaard (1969) who comments on Freud's (1938) statement that the central function of dream work is to replace a demand on the ego with a harmless *wish-fulfillment*:

"Of course, this is in agreement with the examples from 'The Interpretation of Dreams', such as the Irma dream, the well-known dreams of convenience, and the dreams instigated by bodily needs, in which the infantile wish is no longer so readily apparent. [...] Even if one continues to use the attempt at wishfulfilment as one's point of departure, one cannot escape the difficulty of deciding what should be interpreted as wish-fulfilment, and what as a defence. However, this is actually a problem which pervades the analysis as a whole. (p. 226-227)"

This difficulty in understanding *wish-fulfillment* as the result of a defensive process – namely the dream work that protects the sleeping ego from sleep-disturbing demands – stems from Freud's ambiguous double-use of the term *wish*. It is therefore essential to distinguish between *wishes* that trigger dream work and *wish fulfillment* as a mechanism through which dream work enables the individual to go on sleeping. The issue with Freud's double-use of the term *wish* will be addressed in greater detail in Section 2.

Another challenge in understanding *The Interpretation of Dreams* arises from the question of how to conceive of a *sleeping consciousness*, and how such a consciousness maintains certain functions – such as maintaining control over the emergence of unwanted repressed fantasies. This issue exposes a limitation of Freud's topographical model of the mind, as these regulatory functions do not occur *consciously*, but *unconsciously*. This limitation ultimately led to the introduction of Freud's structural model of the psyche – dividing the self into the ego, id, and superego – since, in his earlier theory, the functions attributed to the *sleeping consciousness* are, in structural terms, those of the *unconscious* parts of the ego.

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A further common misunderstanding concerns the classification of latent dream thoughts. Do these develop *before* or *after* the defense mechanisms central to the dream generation process? A popular science example illustrates this confusion: In the *Lexikon der Psychologie* ([Thesaurus of psychology], Spektrum.de, 2023), latent dream thoughts are defined as “hidden and unconscious desires and fears which, according to S. Freud, underlie the manifest, i.e., obvious, dream content.” According to this definition, latent dream thoughts refer to repressed material and are assumed to occur *prior* to dream work. However, as will be discussed in Section 3 of this article, the *Lexikon*’s conclusion may have confused Freud’s concepts *latent dream thoughts* and *sleep-disturbing stimuli*.

Finally, there remains the question of whether only *wishes* and drives can be considered dream-triggering sleep-disturbing stimuli. This is a tempting assumption, since almost any idea can be linked to some wish with a minimal associative effort. However, in the first chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud devotes considerable attention to describing external (sensory stimuli) and internal (organic bodily stimuli) sleep-disturbing stimuli that cannot be reduced to *wishes* or drives.

To clarify these issues, it is helpful to turn to Freud’s later writings – particularly Chapter 5 of the posthumously published essay *Outline of Psychoanalysis* (Freud, 1938). In our opinion, the potential of this work for the further development of dream theory has been largely overlooked or underestimated (cf. 5.). In fact, many authors assume that Freud never applied the structural point of view to dream theory (cf. 5.). However, this is precisely what he did in the chapter mentioned above, namely as an “explanation [of the preceding chapters (addition by the authors)] on the interpretation of dreams” (87), which offers possibilities for integrating Freud’s topographical and structural models of the mind in dream theory, rather than replacing the topographical model, as suggested by Arlow and Brenner (1964). If we have understood correctly, Arlow and Brenner do not reject the descriptive use of the topographical terms consciously, preconsciously, or unconsciously, but rather their systematic use in the form of a doctrine of instances. As such, the second topic is of course superior to the first, because the terms *ego* and *id* cannot be equated with *conscious* and *unconscious*. As is well known, a large part of the ego’s defense organization is unconscious. Chapter 5 of Freud’s *Outline* also includes information that helps clarify his use of the term *wish*, making it well-suited to be used as a guide for rereading *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

The following analysis will therefore examine certain passages from Chapter 5 of the *Outline* in detail, showcasing exactly how Freud’s earlier topographical and later structural models intertwine, forming a kind of coordinate system that can be superimposed upon a rereading of *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

A summary of this new interpretation of Freud’s dream theory is presented in text and as a graphic in Section 3, and as a 10-point list in Section 7.

Section 2: *Wish* and *wish-fulfilment*

Freud used the term *wish* with two distinct meanings. In the first, it denotes “a demand by the *id* for the satisfaction of a drive” (Freud, 1938, p. 169); in the second – as within the phrase *wish-fulfilment* – it refers to what has been repressed

in order to protect sleep. A third aspect, the *wish* of the *ego* to continue to sleep, is less confusing and will therefore not be emphasized here. In the first sense, the *wish* stands at the *beginning* of the dream work; in the second, at the *end*. The first meaning links the *wish* to the sleep-disturbing impulses; whereas the second associates it with the *latent dream thoughts* that protect sleep.

Freud’s double-use of the term may have been intended to imply that dreams, like neurotic symptoms, are formed as a compromise between drive impulses and the defenses mobilized against them. However, this ambiguity complicates the understanding of his entire dream theory, and has led to persistent confusion in its understanding.

To address this issue, two distinct meanings of the term *wish* can be differentiated: when using it under the viewpoint of the first Freudian topic, as in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in contrast to the second one, as used by Freud in *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*.

For the first meaning, Freud’s definition in *The Interpretation of Dreams* may serve as a starting point:

“[...] that the accumulation of excitation [...] is felt as *unpleasant* and that it sets the apparatus in action with a view to repeating the experience of satisfaction, which involved a diminution of excitation and was felt as *pleasure*. A current of this kind in the apparatus, starting from *unpleasant* and aiming at *pleasure*, we have termed a ‘*wish*’; and we have asserted that only a *wish* is able to set the apparatus in motion and that the course of the excitation in it is automatically regulated by feelings of *pleasure* and *unpleasant*” (Freud, 1900, p.598).

This is a very sophisticated, quasi operational definition. In short, a *wish* in this context may be defined as the *psychic representation* of one or more drive impulses. These *psychic representations* may exist at a conscious, preconscious or unconscious level. Accordingly, there can also be conscious, preconscious and unconscious *wishes* and fantasies. When a *wish* is met with a defense, a conflict arises. Just as with neurotic symptoms, a conflict in a dream may lead to a compromise formation. In dreams, however, such a compromise results in *wish-fulfillment* which allows sleep to continue; in neurosis, the compromise gives rise to symptoms that enable, under the given external and internal circumstances, the best possible adaptation to everyday life.

In the second topic, drive impulses are conceptualized as originating in the *id* and being shaped from the start by the unconscious *ego*. In this sense, a *wish* is not the *psychic representation* of a drive impulse originating in the *id*, but rather the *result* of what the *ego* has done with that original impulse (Morgenthaler, 2004). Thus, in this second definition, a *wish* belongs to the *ego* rather than to the *id*.

From the perspective of the second topic, it doesn’t seem adequate to label a “current of this kind” a drive impulse and its *psychic representation* a *wish*. Therefore, the term *wish* as used in Freud’s theory of *wish-fulfillment* should be understood as describing the *result* of dream work rather than its origin.

Whenever the term *wish* refers to the *origin* of dream work – that is, a sleep-disturbing drive impulse arising in the *id* – it should be replaced with Freud’s own phrase “a *demand* [of the *id*, addition by the authors] upon the *ego* for the *satisfaction* of a drive” (Freud, 1938, p. 169), hereafter abbreviated to a *demand* of the *id*. The following sections will show in

greater detail how this terminology can be implemented in a re-reading of *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

Whenever the term *wish* refers to the *result* of dream work, it coincides with its *fulfilment*: a function of the unconscious ego aimed at protecting sleep. *Wish-fulfilment* – or, more precisely, the *attempt* at *wish-fulfilment* through dreaming can thus be considered as the mechanism by which sleep protection may be achieved. This sleep-protecting function of dreams will be central to the argument that follows.

Section 3: Analyzing An Outline of Psychoanalysis

Freud devoted considerable attention to the question of how dream work is initiated. In *Remarks on The Theory and Practice of Dream-Interpretation*, he introduced a distinction between two different types of dreams (Freud, 1923, p. 111):

"It is possible to distinguish between dreams from above and dreams from below, provided the distinction is not made too sharply. [...] This distinction calls for no modification in the theory of dreams."

This distinction is further elaborated in the *Outline*:

"It is best to begin by pointing out that the formation of a dream can be provoked in two different ways. Either a drive-impulse [we replace "instinct" by "drive" as in the translation of Trieb without further notice] which is ordinarily suppressed (that is, an unconscious wish) finds enough strength during sleep to make itself felt by the ego, or an urge left over from waking life [...] finds reinforcement during sleep from an unconscious element. In short, dreams may arise either from the id or from the ego (Freud, 1938, p. 166)."

In these passages, Freud applies his structural model of the psyche to dream theory without ceremony. Evidently, he attributes "dreams from above" to the ego and "dreams from below" to the id, without abandoning the role of the unconscious and the topographical model of the mind: In dreams from above, the "urge left over from waking life [...] finds reinforcement during sleep from an *unconscious element*". Hence, Freud's statements illustrate how the topographical model (i.e. conscious, preconscious and unconscious) can be integrated with his structural perspectives (i.e. ego, id and super-ego) in his dream theory. Freud continues:

"Thus the dream work is essentially an instance of the unconscious working-over of preconscious thought-processes. (Freud, 1938, p. 167)"

This statement may be interpreted as follows: *Unconscious* mental material can disturb sleep only when it is transformed into *preconscious* thought material. Once the *unconscious* thought material becomes *preconscious*, the *unconscious* parts of the ego initiate dream work to process these thoughts, thereby synthesizing a dream, in order to protect sleep.

Freud's statements are further clarified by the following, crucial passage:

"With the help of the unconscious, every dream that is in process of formation makes a demand upon the ego – for the satisfaction of a drive, if the dream originates from the id; for the solution of a conflict, the removal of a doubt or the forming of an intention, if the dream originates from a residue of preconscious activity in waking

life. The sleeping ego, however, is focused on the wish to maintain sleep; it feels this demand as a disturbance and seeks to get rid of the disturbance. The ego succeeds in doing this by what appears to be an act of compliance: it meets the demand with what is in the circumstances a harmless fulfillment of a wish and so gets rid of it. This replacement of the demand by the fulfillment of a wish remains the essential function of the dream work. (Freud, 1938, p. 169-170)"

We comment on this crucial text-passage in detail as follows:

"With the help of the unconscious...":

The *unconscious id* or the *unconscious* parts of the ego generate *preconscious* "demands upon the ego" as described below;

"...every dream that is in process of formation...":

Here, the term "dream" refers to a "hallucinatory experience during sleep with the potential to be remembered";

"...makes a demand upon the ego...":

This demand functions as an *internal* mental stimulus with the potential to disturb sleep. In this context, we restrict our reasoning to dreams resulting from *internal, mental* sleep-disturbing stimuli as opposed to physical stimuli presented during sleep;

"...[a demand] for the satisfaction of a drive, if the dream originates from the id...":

This corresponds to *dreams from below*. The ambiguous term "an unconscious wish" does not appear anymore in Freud's later explanation of his theory.

"... [a demand] for the solution of a conflict, the removal of a doubt or the forming of an intention [realization of a resolution], if the dream originates from a residue of preconscious activity in waking life":

This corresponds to *dreams from above*. Freud identifies three kinds of demands resulting from residues of preconscious activity in waking life. The third – the forming of an intention – is somewhat unclear. Translating "*Herstellung eines Vorsatzes*" as "the keeping of a – previously made – *resolution*" might be more accurate, as Freud probably means the putting-into-practice of an intention. For instance, New Year's resolutions are more than mere intentions, and the difficulty is not forming them but in putting them into practice. This reading is further explained by Binswanger (2016, pp. 733–738) and also supported by Freud (1905) in the case of Dora: "The dream [...] corresponded [...] to an intention which Dora carried with her into her sleep. It was therefore repeated each night until the intention has been carried out. (p. 85)"

At this point, it is worth asking whether Freud's phrase "a residue of preconscious activity in waking life" refers to his technical term "*day's residues*". As in his use of the term *wish*, Freud often employed words both in their colloquial and technical sense. "*Residues of preconscious activity in waking life*" appears to be used here in its nontechnical, descriptive way, referring to possible sleep-disturbing stimuli. The technical term "*day's residues*", however, is generally attributed to contents appearing *explicitly* in the manifest dream – thus a *result* rather than a cause of dream work.

This distinction aligns with the following statement by Freud (bold italics added):

*“But what is the relation of the preconscious residues of the previous day to dreams? There is no doubt that they find their way into dreams in great quantity, and that they make use of the **content of dreams** in order to penetrate into **consciousness** even during the night. Indeed they occasionally dominate the **content** of a dream and force it to carry on the activity of daytime”* (Freud, 1900, p. 555).

*“It must be that they are essential ingredients in the formation of dreams, since experience has revealed the surprising fact that in the **content** of every dream some link with a recent daytime impression — often of the most insignificant sort — is to be detected”* (ibid., p. 562).

Returning now to the passage from the *Outline*:

“The sleeping ego, however, is focused on the wish to maintain sleep; it feels this demand as a disturbance and seeks to get rid of the disturbance”:

Here, the term *wish* is clearly attributed to the ego and not to a drive impulse of the id. This *wish to continue to sleep* is the motive for dream work performed by the unconscious ego and refers to the function of dreams as guardians of sleep. This is perhaps the only circumstance in which the term *wish* can stand on its own — distinct from both a *demand of the id* and a *fulfillment of a wish*.

“The ego [...] meets the demand with what is in the circumstances a harmless fulfillment of a wish and so gets rid of it”:

The *harmless fulfillment of a wish* is the means by which the unconscious ego protects sleep through the formation of dreams, whether they originate from above or from below. In this context, the term “*harmless*” means “*harmless enough to permit the continuation of sleep*”.

*“This **replacement** of the demand by the fulfillment of a wish remains the essential function of the dream work”* (Emphasis by the authors).

Excursus

At this point, a brief excursus is in order. In an earlier English version of this work (Binswanger & Wittmann, 2019, 2020), four mechanisms of dream work were identified: condensation, displacement, reversal into the contrary, and symbolization. These correspond broadly to findings from our clinical work with dreams. However, some clarification is necessary.

In his lectures, Freud explicitly limits the mechanisms of dream work to four: condensation, displacement, representation in plastic form, and secondary revision. (Freud, 1915-16, p. 182). It is unclear why he excludes reversal into the contrary in this context as he frequently referred to it in his descriptions of dream work (e.g. (Freud, 1900, p. 381,327-328, 408, 434, 440, 471-481)). Therefore, this mechanism is included in the present discussion. Moreover, several of Freud's dream-work mechanisms can be understood as ego defense mechanisms discovered later, with reversal into the contrary corresponding closely to the defense mechanism of reaction formation.

On the other hand, Freud explicitly notes that symbolization — symbol formation — has little to do with dream work

per se, but that dream work makes use of *representation by symbols* (Freud, 1900, p. 349-350). For this reason, the term “use of symbols” is preferable to “symbolization.” The use of symbols may often play a role in the “replacement of the demand by wish-fulfillment.” The development of the still verbal dream thought already takes place “as if, in general, the process were dominated by considerations of representability”: “It is very noteworthy how little dream work adheres to word concepts; it is always ready to interchange words until it finds the expression that offers the most favorable means of plastic representation.” (Freud, 1917, p. 228).

Freud describes what he calls *representation in plastic form* as follows: “The dream work thus subjects thoughts to a regressive treatment” (Freud, 1915-16, p. 181). “In the case of the dream-work it is clearly a matter of transforming the latent thoughts which are expressed in words into sensory images, mostly of a visual sort.” (Freud, 1915-16, p. 180). What is meant by *representation in plastic form* is the regressive transformation of latent dream thoughts into hallucinatory perceptions — a process discussed in greater detail later.

In *An Evidential Dream*, Freud also considers whether secondary revision should be counted as part of dream work. If not, one would have to conclude that “dreams in the analytic sense comprise the dream-work proper together with the secondary revision of its products.” (Freud, 1913, p. 275).

Thus, there remains room for debate regarding what should and should not be considered part of dream work. Based on Freud's formulation in the *Outline*, dream work can be divided into three steps:

Step 1: Replacement of a demand by *wish-fulfillment*, through the mechanisms of displacement, condensation, reversal to the contrary, and the use of symbols, carried out with consideration for representability.

Step 2: Regressive transformation of latent dream thoughts into hallucinatory perceptions (Freud's “*represent[ation] in plastic form*”).

Step 3: Secondary revision.

[End of excursus]

The sleep-disturbing stimulus is *replaced* by the harmless, ego-compatible *fulfillment of a wish* — at least harmless enough in order to allow the individual to remain asleep. The theory of *wish-fulfillment* does not concern *how* unconscious wishes (i.e. representations of drive-impulses) may disturb sleep, but rather on *how dream work employs wish-fulfillment* in order to get rid of sleep disturbances.

But why does Freud choose the term *replacement*, instead of the *transformation of the demand into the fulfillment of a wish* — for instance, through compromise formation? A passage from the *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis* (Freud, 1915-16, Lecture IX, p. 136, emphasis in original) offers a clue: “Dreams are things which get rid of (psychical) stimuli disturbing to sleep, by the method of hallucinatory satisfaction”. If the primary purpose of a dream is to “get rid of” (psychical) sleep-disturbing stimuli, then it follows that such psychical stimuli must be *replaced*.

Freud's statements can therefore be interpreted as follows:

In a dream from below, a compromise occurs in which the dream-work allows a weakened, harmless fulfillment of the “*demand on the ego for satisfaction of a drive*”. In a dream from above, the dream replaces the sleep-disturbing stimu-

lus with a harmless *wish fulfillment*. In both cases, *wish-fulfillment* constitutes the content of the latent dream thought produced by dream work as a defensive operation of the unconscious ego (step 1 of dream work). In the manifest dream content, this is further distorted – first through regressive transformation of verbal thoughts into hallucinatory images (step 2 of dream work), and then through secondary revision (step 3 of dream work).

But apart from this question, Freud's dream theory always stated that – at least in its first stage – the *fulfilment of a wish* has a verbal form. It is a thought, called *latent dream thought*. And as he says that the “replacement of the demand by the *fulfilment of a wish* remains the essential function of the dream work” (emphasis RB/LW), he introduces – according to our interpretation – a remarkable shift regarding the essential part of the dream work.

Conventionally, dream-work is understood as the process by which latent dream thoughts are transformed into manifest dream content. According to this understanding, dream work occurs between the emergence of latent dream thoughts and the development of the manifest dream content. For instance, Freud describes the two tasks of dream analysis as follows:

“(...) we can express our two tasks as follows. We have to transform the manifest dream into the latent one, and to explain how, in the dreamer's mind, the latter has become the former. The first portion is a practical task, for which dream-interpretation is responsible; it calls for a technique. The second portion is a theoretical task, whose business it is to explain the hypothetical dream-work; and it can only be a theory” (Freud, 1933, p. 10).

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, however, Freud shifts “the essential function of dream work” toward replacing sleep-disturbing stimuli – the drive's demand on the ego – with the *fulfilment of a wish*, i.e., with the *latent dream thought*.

This apparent contradiction calls for closer examination: As noted in the earlier excursus, it is remarkable that in his *Outline of Psychoanalysis*, Freud omits an important aspect of dream work: the regressive transformation of the *verbal, latent dream thought* into perceptions of things [Freud's “representation in plastic form”]. In *A Metapsychological Supplement to the Theory of Dreams*, Freud (1917) summarizes this process as follows:

“We call this kind of regression a topographical one, to distinguish it from the previously mentioned [p. 223] temporal or developmental regression. (...) The reversal of the course of the excitation from the Pcs. through the Ucs. to perception is at the same time a return to the early stage of hallucinatory wish-fulfilment. (...) In this process thoughts are transformed into images, mainly of a visual sort; that is to say, word-presentations are taken back to the thing-presentations which correspond to them, as if, in general, the process were dominated by considerations of representability. (p. 227-228)”

This “perception” of an “early stage of hallucinatory wish fulfillment” can be interpreted as the *regressive transformation of latent dream thought into the perception of a wishful fantasy*. Such a perception is a product of the primary process and therefore is not yet compatible with the *secondary process* functioning of the conscious ego. Like any external perception, it requires *secondary revision*. Freud (1917) summarizes this as follows:

“The completion of the dream-process consists in the thought-content— regressively transformed and worked over into a wishful phantasy—becoming conscious as a sense-perception; while this is happening it undergoes secondary revision, to which every perceptual concept is subject” (p. 229).

The three steps of dream work can now be summarized in detail as follows:

Step 1: Dream work of the unconscious ego replaces the sleep-disturbing stimuli — *demands on the ego* — with harmless preconscious *wish-fulfillments* in verbal form, referred to as *latent dream thoughts*. This process of replacement is shaped by the ego's defense mechanisms – displacement, condensation, reversal into the contrary, and the use of symbols – while also taking into account considerations of representability.

Step 2: The *verbal latent dream thought* undergoes a regressive transformation from the preconscious through the unconscious into *hallucinatory perceptions of things*. The result is a *sensory perception* into which the verbal latent dream thought has been transformed. This is a product of the *primary process* with which the *unconscious* ego operates. In this form, the sensory perception is still incompatible with the *secondary process* with which the *preconscious* and *conscious* ego operates.

Step 3: The perception of the latent dream thought is then subjected to *secondary revision* (as is every perception) by the *preconscious* ego, producing the manifest dream in a form compatible with the *secondary process* of *conscious* ego functioning.

These three steps correspond in part to the summary of Freud's second conflict model of dream formation proposed by Gilmore and Nersessian (1999, p. 229). This understanding of dream work will serve as a foundation for examining Freud's continued development of his dream theory in *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*.

The crucial quotations of the *Outline* and their interpretation may serve as a sort of grid of parallels and meridians for the lecture of *The Interpretation of Dream*. We summarize the essence of this approach below, highlighting the application of the structural perspective in *italics*:

Dreams are triggered by external, somatic, and psychological stimuli capable of disturbing sleep. The psychological stimuli consist of *demands made upon the ego*, which can be divided into two categories. The first is a *demand for the satisfaction of a drive from the unconscious id*, which becomes preconscious; the second is a *demand for the resolution of a conflict, the removal of a doubt, or the realization of a resolution – preconscious concerns of the ego reinforced by an unconscious element*.

If these demands were allowed to reach the *conscious* ego in their unprocessed forms, they would awaken the sleeper. To prevent this, the dream work of the *unconscious* ego (Step 1) censors and transforms them using defense mechanisms – displacement, condensation, reversal into the contrary, and the use of symbols – replacing the sleep-disturbing stimuli with a harmless *fulfillment of a wish* in verbal form. The result is the *verbal latent dream thought*. This process must also follow considerations of representability – that is, the “Requirement imposed on the dream-thoughts; they undergo selection and transformation such as to make

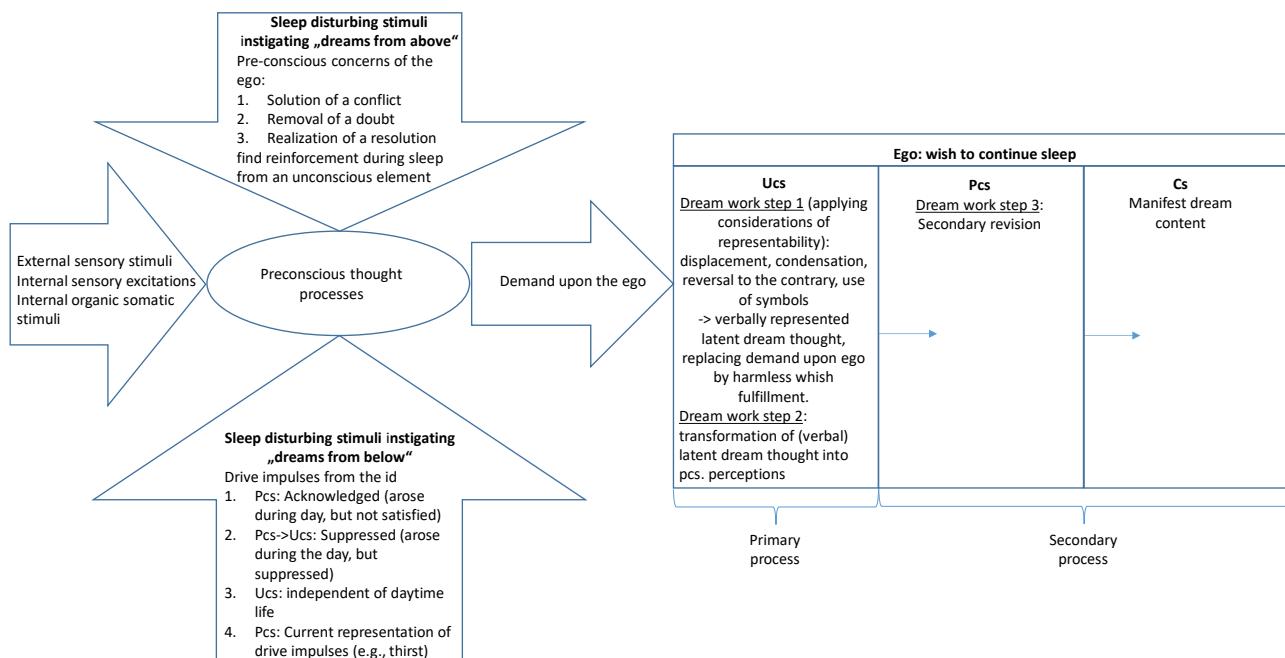


Figure 1. Re-formulated dream theory according to Freud (1900). Pcs: preconscious; Ucs: unconscious; Cs: conscious.

them capable of being represented by images – particularly visual images" (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973, p. 389).

Dream work operates with what Freud called the primary process. The result is the latent dream thought, which replaces the sleep-disturbing stimulus with a harmless fulfillment of a wish. The latent dream thought is then transformed regressively into a sensory perception (dream work step 2). This completes the task of the unconscious ego, which operates according to the primary process. It has done its job, first replacing the sleep-disturbing stimulus with the latent dream thought and then transforming this into an initial, provisional sensory perception. Conversely, for the conscious ego, which is operating according to the secondary process, the result is not yet compatible with the continuation of sleep; it may remain too absurd, puzzling, frightening, or may still contain traces of the sleep-disturbing stimulus that will wake the sleeping individual. Therefore, the sensory perception representing the latent dream thought must be transformed by the preconscious ego into a more coherent representation compatible with the conscious ego's secondary process. Freud (1900) characterized secondary revision as follows:

*"This instance, however, provides us with convincing evidence that not everything contained in a dream is derived from the dream-thoughts, but that contributions to its content may be made by a psychical function which is **indistinguishable from our waking thoughts**"* (p. 489, emphasis added).

In our opinion, it is consistent with the general logic of Freud's theory to attribute secondary revision to the preconscious ego (cf. Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973, p. 412, as well as Lansky, 1990). Freud calls this occurrence secondary revision (dream work Step 3), which determines the final manifest dream content. The more effective the censorship and secondary revision process, the more coherent the

structure of the manifest dream – and the better it serves its function as the "guardian of sleep" (Freud, 1900, p. 233).

This interpretation allows the stones in the edifice of *The Interpretation of Dreams* to remain atop one another. (The metaphor of the "stones in the edifice" goes back to Ilse Grubrich-Simitis (2000). She writes regarding to Freud's 1925 revision of *The Interpretation of Dreams*: "For if he had actually attempted systematically to incorporate [...] the structural theory conceived in *The Ego and the Id* (1923a), hardly one stone could have remained on another in the edifice of the book" (p. 1173).)

The present interpretation shows that Chapter Five of the *Outline* offers a framework for resolving some of the major ambiguities in Freud's original theory of dreams. It also demonstrates how Freud's structural model of the mind can be smoothly integrated with his earlier, topographical model in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Figure 1 illustrates the reformulated understanding of Freud's theory on dreams instigated by internal mental stimuli.

Section 4: Examples of how to re-read *The Interpretation of Dreams* with this Interpretation

Let us turn to a few selected passages from Section C of Chapter VII of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* to illustrate how the present interpretation – developed from the *Outline* – can be applied. It should be borne in mind that *The Interpretation of Dreams* does not yet make an explicit distinction between dreams from above and dreams from below. Freud's term *wish* can therefore be understood in most cases as a sleep-disturbing drive demand on the ego. In the following passages, words from the original text are omitted [in brackets] and replaced in **bold italics** according to the terminology of *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, as suggested by the present interpretation:

*"It will no doubt have surprised all of us to be told that dreams [are] **work with** nothing other than fulfilments of*

wishes [...]. Since, then, our daytime thinking produces psychical acts of such various sorts — judgements, inferences, denials, expectations, intentions, and so on — why should it be obliged during the night to restrict itself to the production of [wishes] **wish fulfilments** alone? Are there not, on the contrary, numerous dreams which show us psychical acts of other kinds — worries, for instance — transformed into dream-shape?" (p. 550).

"We may next ask where the [wishes] **demands upon the ego for the satisfaction of a drive or representations of drive impulses (both formulas are used synonymously in these examples)** that [come true] are replaced by **wish-fulfilments** in dreams originate. [...] I can distinguish three possible origins for such a [wish] **demand upon the ego for the satisfaction of a drive**. (1) It may have been aroused during the day and for external reasons may not have been satisfied; in that case an acknowledged [wish] **demand upon the ego for a satisfaction of a drive** which has not been dealt with is left over for the night. (2) It may have arisen during the day but been repudiated; in that case what is left over is a [wish] **demand upon the ego for a satisfaction of a drive** which has not been dealt with but has been suppressed. (3) It may have no connection with daytime life and be one of those [wishes] **demands upon the ego for a satisfaction of a drive** which only emerge from the suppressed part of the mind and become active in us at night. If we turn again to our schematic picture of the psychical apparatus, we shall localize [wishes] **demands** of the first kind in the system Pcs.; we shall suppose that [wishes] **demands** of the second kind have been driven out of the system Pcs. into the Ucs., where, if at all, they continue to exist; and we shall conclude that [wishful impulses] **the representations of drive impulses** of the third kind are altogether incapable of passing beyond the system Ucs." (p. 551).

This distinction between the origin of **demands upon the ego for the satisfaction of a drive** does not appear in the Outline, but it can easily be integrated into the proposed re-formulation of Freud's dream theory — together with an additional, fourth source.

"If we cast our minds over the dreams that are at our disposal for answering this question, we shall at once be reminded that we must add a fourth source of dream-[wishes] **demands upon the ego**, namely the current [wishful] **representations of drive impulses** that arise during the night (e.g. those stimulated by thirst or sexual needs). In the next place, we shall form the opinion that the place of origin of a dream-[wish] **demand for the satisfaction of a drive** probably has no influence on its capacity for instigating dreams" (p. 552).

"It will then appear as though the conscious [wish] **representation of a drive impulse** alone had been realized in the dream; only some small peculiarity in the dream's configuration will serve as a finger-post to put us on the track of the powerful ally from the unconscious. These [wishes] **representations of drive impulses** in our unconscious, ever on the alert and, so to say, immortal, [...] these [wishes] **representations of drive impulses**, held under repression, are themselves of infantile origin, as we are taught by psychological research into the neuroses [...] a [wish] **representation of a drive impulse which is**

represented in a dream must be an infantile one (bold italics by Freud). In the case of adults it originates from the Ucs., in the case of children, where there is as yet no division or censorship between the Pcs. and the Ucs., or where that division is only gradually being set up, it is an unfulfilled, unrepressed [wish] **representation of a drive impulse** from waking" (p. 553).

This passage may refer to what Freud called the navel of dream theory. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he uses this metaphor to describe the point where the dream "reaches down into the unknown" (Freud, 1900, p. 525). Within dream theory, the unknown refers to the manner in which infantile drives — which, according to Freud, are present in every dream (Freud, 1900, pp. 189-219) — enter the dream. Do such infantile drives accompany the **drive demands on the ego** in dreams from below? Do they belong to the **unconscious element** which reinforces the **residue of preconscious activity in waking life** in dreams from above? Or do they emerge during the regressive transformation of thoughts into images, since the preconscious material passes through the unconscious and accumulates the infantile material there by means of "attraction" (Freud, 1900, pp. 546-547)?

The examples cited from *The Interpretation of Dreams* thus support the hypothesis that integrating Freud's later structural model into his earlier dream theory provides clarity without sacrificing its depth or richness.

Finally, a re-reading of a passage from Freud's own summary of *The Interpretation of Dreams* as given in *An Evidential Dream* (1913) may be offered as follows:

"Let me recapitulate here as briefly as possible what I have said on this question in my *Interpretation of Dreams*.

[The so-called 'day's residues'] **Residues of preconscious activity in waking life** can act as disturbers of sleep and constructors of dreams; they are affectively cathected thought-processes from the dream-day, which have resisted the general lowering [of energy (the words „of energy“ have been introduced by the translators and have no direct correspondence in the original German text)] through sleep. These [day's residues] **residues of preconscious activity in waking life** are uncovered by tracing back the manifest dream to the latent dream-thoughts; they constitute portions of the latter and are thus among the activities of waking life — whether conscious or unconscious — which have been able to persist into the period of sleep. In accordance with the multiplicity of thought-processes in the conscious and preconscious, these [day's residues] **residues of preconscious activity in waking life** have the most numerous and varied meanings: they may be [wishes] demands for the satisfaction of a drive or fears that have not been disposed of, or intentions, reflections, warnings, attempts at adaptation to current tasks, and so on. To this extent the classification of dreams that is under consideration seems to be justified by the content which is uncovered by interpretation. These [day's residues] **residues of preconscious activity in waking life**, however, are not the dream itself: they lack the main essential of a dream. Of themselves they are not able to construct a dream. [...]

The present state of our knowledge leads us to conclude that the essential factor in the construction of dreams is an unconscious [wish] **element** — as a rule an infantile [wish] **representation of a drive impulse**, now re-

pressed – which can come to expression in this somatic or psychical material (in the [day's residues] **residues of preconscious activity in waking life** too, therefore) (parentheses by Freud) and can thus supply these with a force which enables them to press their way through to consciousness even during the suspension of thought at night. The [dream] **result of dream work** is in every case a **harmless fulfilment** of this unconscious [wish] **representation of a drive impulse**, whatever else it may contain – warning, reflection, admission, or any other part of the rich content of preconscious waking life that has persisted undelighted into the night. It is this unconscious [wish] **element** that gives the dream-work its peculiar character as an unconscious revision of preconscious material." (p. 273-274).

Freud's recapitulation poses several challenges to the understanding of the theory. First, Freud uses the term *day's residue* to refer to what, in the present interpretation, has been re-named according to the *Outline*, *residues of preconscious activity in waking life*. In the current reformulation, *day's residue* is reserved for contents that appear *explicitly* in the manifest dream. Second, Freud seems to conflate characteristics of what he later calls dreams from above with dreams from below. Freud's recapitulation therefore stands as an exemplary passage for showcasing how his structural model of the mind clarifies the dream theory, especially with the distinction between the double-meanings of the term *wish*. The integration of Freud's structural model of the mind enables Freud's recapitulation to be read as if he refers exclusively to dreams from above. In such dreams, the *residues of preconscious activity in waking life* require *reinforcement from an unconscious element*. This element may indeed consist of *representations of drive impulses*, but can also include other unconscious elements such as repressed traumatic memories.

Section 5: Comparison with selected examples of literature

The application of the structural model on dream theory by Freud himself in the *Outline of Psychoanalysis* was often overlooked, e.g. by Erikson (1954), Arlow and Brenner (1964), and Morgenthaler (2004). Morgenthaler (2004) sought to conduct a word-for-word re-reading of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (p. 11), applying the findings of ego psychology to dream interpretation (p. 20). He had obviously overlooked or forgotten that Freud had already anticipated this development in the *Outline*. Lansky (1992) dedicated the 29th lecture of the *New Series of Lectures*, titled *Revision of the Theory of Dreams*, to his anthology *Essential Papers on Dreams*, even though the *Outline* already contains a much more thorough revision of Freud's earlier theory. Only Beland (1991, p. 630) points out that there is "a temporary use of the structural theory in explaining dreams", and Langs (1971, p. 166) observes that Freud's "final comments on the sources of dreams [...] were [...] couched [...] in structural terms". Turnbull and Solms (2007), Grubrich-Simitis (2000) and Johnson (2001) also discuss the *Outline*, yet none of these authors emphasize that it marks Freud's first incorporation of the structural model into his original dream theory. Binswanger and Wittmann (2019, section 5) cite other authors who refer to Freud's *Outline*.

This essay's interpretation is consistent with that of Spanjaard (1969) and Langs (1971), whereas other authors – such

as Erikson (1954), Levine (1998, pp. 38-39), and Blechner (2001, p. 16) – interpret the *Outline* as evidence that Freud partially abandoned his theory of *wish-fulfillment* and adopted a more adaptive perspective. This recurring misunderstanding arises from the tendency to view the wish as the *origin* of dream work rather than – as in the form of *wish-fulfillment* – its result.

Section 6: Clinical Applications

In clinical practice, the described interpretation shifts the central question of dream analysis from "which dangerous unconscious *wish* is (partly) fulfilled by the dream?" to "which sleep-disturbing stimulus compelled the sleeper to produce a remembered dream?". This perspective broadens the scope of dream-interpretation without fundamentally altering Freud's theory of the *wish-fulfilling function of dreams*. *Wishes*, conceived as *demands upon the ego for the satisfaction of a drive* can thus be regarded as one possible instigator of dreams among many others – such as preconscious concerns or conflicts that remained insufficiently recognized or unresolved during waking life. Binswanger (2016, p. 754-755) proposed a further expansion of possible sleep-disturbing stimuli:

"Think, for example, of everything that may prevent a child from sleeping. Not only are there anxieties, deception, anger, mourning, crude drive-impulses and so forth – stimuli that we are used to recognizing as possible causes of sleep-disturbance. There are others as well, such as pleasant anticipation – e.g., of the child's birthday, a school outing or a beloved person's visit. We are less used to recognizing these kinds of emotions as causing the formation of a dream in an adult analysand. The deepening of a positive transference may cause a strong, pleasant anticipation of meeting with the analyst in the coming session, and interventions that permit a new experience, with a consequent easing of old conflicts, might touch an analysand intensely and could awaken him. Interventions that enable new experiences resulting in the loosening of old conflicts could deeply affect an analysand, awakening him. Dream work takes place to prevent awakening by such strong positive feelings as well [...]"

The following example illustrates how the present essay's understanding of Freud's dream theory can be clinically applied to traumatized patients, who characteristically suffer from replicative, repetitive dreams that fail to protect sleep (Wittmann & de Dassel, 2015). The search for a *wish* as sleep-disturbing stimulus remains inadequate. Binswanger (2016, p.742) presents an example of a dream associated with a traumatic event:

"The dreamer observes her mother laying on the exam table in the office of her father, a medical doctor. He is standing on the mother's right side and his female aide is at the foot of the table. The dreamer knows that her mother is dying. Father says: "Keep quiet—we'll do this, it's all right." The mother dies. The dreamer is startled and screams. The father leaves the room with his aide. The dreamer continues screaming until she awakens."

The essential clue to understanding this dream lies in the direct speech reported in the manifest dream. Freud (1900, p. 183-184) assumed that "When anything in a dream has

the character of direct speech, that is to say, when it is said or heard and not merely thought (...), then it is derived from something actually spoken in waking life". In this case, the father's words "Keep quiet—we'll do this, it's all right." turned out to have been spoken by a clergyman who had repeatedly abused the dreamer in early adolescence.

The present essay's perspective on certain post-traumatic dreams is consistent with a theory developed by Lansky (Lansky, 1991; Lansky & Bley, 1995) during his work with inpatients in a psychiatric facility. Most of these forty patients had been hospitalized multiple times, and their traumatic experiences had occurred several decades earlier. Lansky proposed that *chronic* post-traumatic dreams – in contrast to the dreams of acutely traumatized patients without psychiatric comorbidity, which he refers to as "stress reaction fantasies" (p. 386) – may be triggered by shame-inducing experiences related to interpersonal conflicts or symptoms that occurred the day before the dream. According to Lansky, the dream then attempts to *fulfill a wish* through the defense mechanism of displacement – Lansky himself refers to the concept of a *cover memory* – which serves to divert attention from the immediate, shameful stimulus and replace it with a traumatic memory from the distant past. This maneuver leads to the false conclusion that the current psychic tension originates from something old and familiar, rather than from a new distressing conflict. While the cover memory may temporarily defend against conscious awareness of recent shame, the frequent awakening from post-traumatic nightmares indicates that such *attempts at wish-fulfillment* often fail or come at too high a psychic cost. This phenomenon demonstrates that the tension arising from unresolved shame is too powerful to be neutralized through dream work; it can only be reinterpreted through displacement into a cover memory associated with earlier trauma. In alignment with the present essay's interpretations, Lansky redirects the clinical focus toward identifying sleep-disturbing stimuli – a current experience of shame – thereby enabling a meaningful understanding of dream repetition (cf. Gardner & Orner, 2009).

Section 7: Conclusion

The main characteristics of the reinterpreted Freudian theory of dreams can be summarized as follows:

1. Initiation of dream generation: The process of dream-generation is triggered by external or internal stimuli that are incompatible with the continuation of sleep. These may be sensory stimuli originating outside or within the body. Psychoanalytic dream theory typically focuses on *internal psychological* stimuli that arise either from the id (libidinal or aggressive drives directed toward the ego) or from the ego (remnants of preconscious activity in waking life that are reinforced by an unconscious element).

2. Function of dreams: The function of the hallucinatory experiences remembered as dreams is to *protect sleep*.

3. Wish-fulfillment as a mechanism: *Wish-fulfillment* serves as the means by which this sleep-protective function is achieved. In "dreams from below", arising from the id, *wish fulfillment* represents a *compromise* between the sleep-disturbing stimulus and the ego's interest in remaining asleep. In "dreams from above", arising from the ego, dream work *replaces* the sleep-disturbing stimulus with a harmless preconscious *wish-fulfilment*. In both cases, the

result of such dream work must be compatible with the ego's functioning and harmless enough to allow sleep to continue.

4. Latent dream thoughts: In both "dreams from below" and "dreams from above", *wish fulfillment* constitutes the content of the *latent dream thought*. It represents the outcome of the first step of dream work – as outlined in the excursus above – that is, a defense operation of the unconscious ego. The latent dream thought has a verbal form.

5. Step 1 of Dream Work: At step 1, dream work consists of the unconscious processing of preconscious material – external or internal stimuli that disturb sleep. This step is performed by the unconscious ego which operates according to the primary process. Its main mechanisms are displacement, condensation, reversal into the contrary, and the use of symbols. Hereby, dream work supports the subsequent transformation into a sensory representation by considering representability in the development of the verbal latent dream thoughts.

6. Step 2 of Dream Work: The verbal latent dream-thought is transformed into *hallucinatory perceptions of things*. The result is a sensory perception derived from the latent dream thought, shaped by the primary process functioning of the unconscious ego. In this form, it remains incompatible with the secondary process functioning of the conscious ego.

7. Step 3 of Dream Work: This preliminary sensory perception – like external sensory perceptions – undergoes secondary revision by the preconscious ego. This transformation produces a more coherent conscious hallucinatory sensory experience – the manifest dream content – which is compatible with the secondary process of the conscious ego.

8. Failure of sleep protection: If the result of the preceding steps fails to replace the sleep-disturbing stimulus with a sufficiently harmless *wish-fulfilment* and its elaboration according to the secondary process, the manifest dream content provokes anxiety, potentially resulting in awakening the individual – a failure of the sleep-protective function, as in the case of a nightmare.

9. Clarification of Terminology: In order to avoid confusion, the term *wish* as used in Freud's dream theory should only be used in the realm of *wish-fulfillment*, i.e. describing the *result* of dream work rather than its *origin*. Furthermore, Freud's expression *a residue of preconscious activity in waking life* referring to a part of the sleep-disturbing stimulus should not be confused with his term *day's residue*. The latter term should be reserved for material appearing explicitly in the manifest dream.

10. Clinical Implications: This proposed reinterpretation of Freud's dream theory broadens the possibilities for its clinical applications without altering the conception of the *wish-fulfilling function* of dreams. In clinical practice, the described interpretation shifts the central question of dream analysis from "which dangerous unconscious wish is (partly) fulfilled by the dream?" to "which sleep-disturbing stimulus compelled the sleeper to produce a remembered dream?".

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